

CATHOLIC PROPAGANDA AND THE WORLD WAR

By ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON

TO many innocent people the Catholic Church is just one of many "religious denominations." The Catholic differs from the rest of us in regarding the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth, in believing in transubstantiation, in practising confession, and in frequenting churches with Latin services and a more elaborate and picturesque ritual than most. All this, we feel, is nothing to quarrel about. Every man to his taste! Religion is a private matter, and one may be a Catholic and still a good citizen and a fellow-worker in building that better world which we hope to see rising on the ruins left by the holocaust of war. People who take this view are unable to understand the attacks on the Catholic Church by such writers as Mr. McCabe and Mr. Wells. Such attacks seem to them fanatical, intolerant, and incompatible with the spirit of Rationalism.

These good people unfortunately do not know what they are talking about. The Catholic Church is not just one of many religious denominations. It is one of the mightiest corporations in the world. It once ruled Western Europe. In the Middle Ages it was the greatest feudal proprietor in the West; one third of the land belonged to its clergy and monks, and a regular tribute flowed from every Western country to fill the coffers of a Pope who claimed (and sometimes exercised with effect) the right to excommunicate and depose princes and to dispose of their kingdoms to his nominees. In the later Middle Ages this right was successfully challenged, and at the Reformation papal authority was repudiated and Church lands extensively confiscated in the countries of Northern Europe. After the French Revolution it seemed for a moment as if the work of anti-clericalism had been done, and as if Catholicism had been reduced to what, on the liberal theory, should be its rightful status—that of a private opinion held by a number of

individuals who were free to propagate it by any lawful means, but entitled to no favour, no privilege, and no assistance at the hands of the State. But the Catholic Church has never accepted such a status. Religion for it is not a private matter. In the words of Alison Phillips, "to pretend to an independent judgment in questions of faith or morals is for a Roman Catholic to commit treason against his Church."¹ The Church lays down faith in its dogmas as a duty, anathematizes liberty of conscience, and defends to this day the right to punish heresy with death.

Brutum fulmen, you may say. Why worry over the theoretical right of the Church to persecute when everyone knows that in this enlightened age "the police won't let them"? And of course it is perfectly true that without the support of the secular arm the Church's anathemas are idle threats. For this reason the Catholic Church, ever since the Reformation, has sought the alliance of some secular power which, in return for the services of the Church as an auxiliary policeman, would assist in the forcible suppression of infidels and heretics. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that power was Spain. When Spain decayed the Popes turned to Bourbon France. Since the French Revolution the growth of Liberalism and democracy has undermined one papal prop after another and threatened to leave the Church without any secular bully at beck and call. But in our own day other interests besides the Church have taken fright at popular movements. Big business, threatened by trade unionism and Socialism, has financed Fascist movements far and wide—first in Italy, then in Spain, Austria, Poland, Germany, South America, and elsewhere; and the Catholic Church, whose power to direct souls is menaced by the same enemies which threaten big business, has cordially shaken hands with the new ally.

"Under the Fascist régime," wrote Monsignor J. Moyes in 1926, "the relations between the Papacy and the Kingdom of Italy have been more friendly than they have been at any time since the Italian occupation, and the Holy See has welcomed with gratitude the fuller recognition of religion by the civil authorities and the restoration of religious teaching in the schools."² This process of reconciliation culminated in the restoration of the temporal power of the Pope by Mussolini in 1929. Nor did the conversion of Fascist Italy into a war-mongering State and an enemy of world peace in any way

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13th edition, article "Roman Catholic Church."

² *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13th edition, supplementary volumes, article "Roman Catholic Church."

weaken Catholic support for the Duce. When the Italian attack on Abyssinia was launched in 1935 Cardinal Hinsley explained that the Pope had to support Mussolini because if he fell "God's cause" went too, and Mr. Evelyn Waugh, British Catholic novelist, exhorted us in the *Evening Standard* to sit acquiescent in our armchairs and listen to the war news on the wireless. Nor is it on record that the Roman hierarchy, from the Pope down, uttered any protest against that diabolical assault on an unoffending people, carried to victory by poison gas and made possible only by the collective cowardice of Governments which by one bold stroke could have sent the "sawdust Cæsar" crashing to his doom.

There is a widespread impression that the Catholic Church, if complacent towards Italian Fascism, at least put up a fight against German Nazism. It is true that since the defeat of Germany the Pope has used strong language about the "Satanic spectre of National Socialism." But there is no great heroism in slaying the slain. At a time when there is an undue disposition to take Catholic claims in this regard at their face value it is well to remember certain facts. Adolf Hitler was a Roman Catholic. He may or may not have been a believing Catholic: that is not the point. The Catholic Church claims as its members all who have been validly baptized, and does not recognize the right to apostatize. Hitler, therefore, was subject to the pains and penalties prescribed by the Church for mortal sin. And if any man was a mortal sinner, the creator of Buchenwald and Belsen, the persecutor of the Jews, the planner of the Second World War, and the mass murderer of millions of Poles, Dutchmen, Frenchmen, Britons, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Russians, and Americans (to say nothing of his German dupes) was surely one. Many a medieval ruler was excommunicated for far less. Yet not one word of censure did the Catholic Church ever pronounce on Adolf Hitler till he was reported to be safely dead. The present Pope, as Cardinal Pacelli, was papal nuncio in Germany during the years which saw the rise of the Nazi Party, and knew all about it. When Hitler came into power Pacelli was Secretary of State at the Vatican. An official censure (even if it did not amount to excommunication) of the Nazis for the orgy of arson, torture, and murder that marked their rule in Germany would have earned the Papacy the respect even of anti-Catholics. It would have entailed no danger to the Pope; and if it had, since when have Catholics been conscientious objectors to martyrdom? But the word was never spoken. Nor was it spoken in the war. The Pope washed his hands of responsibility when Germany invaded Norway and Denmark, on the

ground that no Roman Catholic country was involved and that he had to "keep in mind the 30,000,000 German Roman Catholics."¹ He looked the other way when German bombs devastated Rotterdam and Coventry, when German executioners wiped out Lidice, and when whole populations in Eastern Europe were reduced to slavery. And when Pétain turned traitor and France fell into the clutches of the Germans and their Vichy accomplices the *Osservatore Romano* hailed it as "the dawn of a new and radiant day not only for France but for Europe and the world," and the *Catholic Herald*, a paper calling itself British, informed its readers that "all that is vital in the soul of France, purified and glorified in heroic suffering, can look out once more upon Europe with a clear Christian purpose."²

Light is thrown on the Catholic attitude to Fascism when we compare and contrast it with the Catholic attitude to the Soviet Union. It is not too much to say that the key to Vatican policy during the last half-century is to be found in an increasing terror and hatred of Socialism. That terror and hatred are intelligible. The Church depends for its power on the poverty and ignorance of the masses and on the service which the hierarchy can render to the ruling classes as an auxiliary policeman. In a society in which everyone was scientifically educated and in which the exploitation of man by man had disappeared, the Catholic Church as we know it could not live. Such a society might have a religion and might conceivably call itself Christian—though I doubt it; but if it did its Christianity would be something very different from the doctrines set forth by the Church. Now Socialism, whether we agree with it or not, at any rate aims at such a society. In effect it aims at putting the priest out of a job. The Catholic Church therefore has always denounced it. In the Soviet Union Socialism, for good or ill, has come into power and, whether or not its methods commend themselves to us, has undeniably carried out a social revolution and proved itself able to survive the terrible tests of totalitarian war. To the Catholic Church, rooted as it is in the pre-scientific past and dependent on the survival of a pre-scientific mentality, this is a Satanic portent. Never since the Goddess of Reason was worshipped in Notre Dame—perhaps never since early Islam swept out of the Arabian desert—has the Church had to meet such a challenge. The hierarchy knows what it is up against. Read the Catholic Press, and you will find the Soviet

¹ *New York Times*, Rome correspondent, April 17, 1940, quoted by McCabe, *The Papacy in Politics To-Day*, p. 75.

² Quoted *ibid.*, p. 82.

Government constantly referred to, not as Communists, not as Bolsheviks, but as "the anti-Gods," for all the world as if God were menaced with assassination and needed police protection. And in a sense he does. For, if once a successful society is built on a purely secular and scientific basis, God as the Church knows him will fade away. I am not saying that Russia has built such a society. It is enough that Russia is trying to, and that many people think the experiment has been vindicated by a measure of success. That is enough for the Catholic Church. That is Antichrist. That is the enemy.

When this is borne in mind much that is otherwise unintelligible becomes clear. The papal support of Fascism in Italy and the papal silence on the crimes of Nazism in Germany are easily understood if we remember that the Papacy, in common with many highly respectable and influential people all over the world, regarded Hitler and Mussolini as saviours from Bolshevism. Vatican policy has never been marked by moral squeamishness. The Papacy which seven hundred years ago preached the crusade against the Albigenses and said, "Kill all; God will know his own!"—the Papacy which less than four hundred years ago blessed the Massacre of St. Bartholomew—the Papacy which, in the words of Acton, "made the principle of assassination a law of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation," has not changed its nature. Morality does not mean to Rome what it means to us. We believe in the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Rome does not. "The Catholic Church," in the words of John Henry Newman, "holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin. . . ."¹ Can we wonder, then, that the Church should deem her continued power cheaply purchased by a world war—nay, if need be, by a succession of world wars? That in 1934, on the morrow of Japanese aggression in Manchuria, the *Catholic Times* should have written that, "in the event of a war between Japan and Russia, Catholics would sympathize with Japan"? That in 1940, when alliance with the Soviet Union was obviously the one hope for Britain and for civilization, the *Catholic Herald* should have exclaimed: "Far better go down with our honour intact than clutch at a filthy straw"?

Nor must it be supposed for a moment that the defeat of the Axis Powers will stop the Catholic hierarchy from fishing in troubled waters. The Russo-Polish dispute has been

¹ *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, p. 247.

largely of Catholic manufacture. Russia and Poland are countries of kindred race and kindred language. The difference between them has always been mainly religious. In the early Middle Ages Russia was Christianized from Constantinople and became Orthodox; Poland was Christianized from the West and became Catholic. Throughout their history the usual neighbourly quarrels have been exacerbated by this religious difference. Each has had the upper hand in turn; sometimes Poland has invaded Russia, sometimes Russia Poland; latterly, for over a century, Poland suffered partition and political extinction. The Russian Revolution removed the old ground of quarrel, but introduced a new one: Russia became a Socialist State ruled by Marxist Materialists, while Poland remained semi-feudal and Catholic—Rome's outpost in Eastern Europe, and a spearhead of the West in the unsuccessful war of intervention against the Soviets. The recent common struggle against Germany has happily brought the two peoples together; and all who value world peace must wish to see Russia and Poland reconciled and allied, to their mutual profit.

But that is the last thing which the Catholic hierarchy desires. A Poland allied to Russia would be worse than useless to Rome. So, through the medium of the now defunct *émigré* Polish Government in London and a clique of Catholic M.P.s in close touch with them, a barrage of propaganda was kept up with the deliberate object of wrecking a settlement at no matter what cost to the peace of the world. Blood-curdling stories were put about of mass arrests, wholesale deportations, enforced Communism, and anti-religious persecution. Stefan Litauer, special correspondent of the *News Chronicle* and himself a Pole, conducted a four months' investigation in Poland and branded these stories as lies. The Dean of Canterbury also visited Poland, and, like Litauer, reported that the Catholic Church enjoyed full freedom, and that not even Church lands had been confiscated. But the Catholic hierarchy invariably considers itself persecuted if it is not allowed to persecute. The lies may be expected to continue.

Another country which is the subject of Catholic propaganda is Yugoslavia. During the German occupation the Yugoslav peasantry maintained a heroic resistance under the now famous leadership of Marshal Tito. Tito stands for friendship with Russia, and that fact has been sufficient to draw on him the full fury of the Catholic barrage. Like many revolutionaries, Tito goes under a pseudonym (his real name is Broz), and the *Catholic Herald* took advantage of this fact to circulate the puerile story that the letters TITO stood for "Third

International Terrorist Organization"! In due course an anonymous correspondent (Catholic by internal evidence) wrote to *The Times* to denounce the "non-Christian tyrannous rule" of Tito over the Catholic Croats, with the usual harrowing stories of murdered priests and the rest of it. Two other correspondents (one British, one American, and both recently in Yugoslavia) promptly nailed the lie to the counter. The original correspondent's reply, needless to say, was to tell the tale again.¹

There can be no doubt that the set policy of Catholic propagandists is by hook or crook to engineer a third world war in which, if they can so arrange it, Britain and the United States, with any allies they can muster (not excluding Germany), will be arrayed against the Soviet Union. On the Russian entry into Berlin numerous cuttings from the *Catholic Herald*, containing attacks on the Soviet Union underlined in red, were found filed at the Nazi radio station.² In this country former members of the British Union of Fascists (which had a high percentage of Catholics in its membership) have come into the open as self-styled "National" propagandists and circulated anti-Semitic literature, together with a publication by the Catholic Truth Society demanding war on Russia for the "liberation" of Poland.³ This agitation will go on. It is for us Britons of the Protestant as well as Rationalist tradition,

"Who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held,"

to show these mischief-makers that they overreach themselves, and that as "the Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England," so his political and journalistic minions have neither part nor lot in the shaping of our domestic and foreign policy.

¹ *The Times*, May 23, 24, 26, and June 5, 1945.

² *Soviet News*, June 12, 1945.

³ *Reynolds News*, July 1, 1945.